Snakes are Everywhere

By Joseph McGuire

 There are snakes in my house. Snakes everywhere I go, in every room and every cupboard. I find errant snakes in my food, and snakes trail behind my feet when I do not adequately check for them upon leaving the house.

It has been this way for most of my life, since childhood. My home wasn’t the happiest or most stable growing up. My parents were unhappy which in turn made me unhappy, and also there were snakes in every room of the house.

It started when I was nine, when my parents were first beginning to really fight, that was when I found the first snake, petulant and green loitering in the pantry. I was scared at first, and ran away leaving the dry goods to fend for themselves, but when I gathered the courage to return, I saw that the creature had no interest in me or anything else. It was content to lounge in the pantry, a fat, lazy grin (or whatever snakes do instead of grinning) on its fat and contented face.

 I told my parents about it, but they weren’t too concerned. Apparently, the Snake had been there for a while before I even noticed it. “You never look up from your shoes to see anything, silly.” My mother playfully joked, but this was no laughing matter. I insisted that part of their duties as caregivers was to ensure a snake-free environment in which I could safely mature.

My father was reluctant, but eventually complied with my wishes. He grabbed the snake with some tongs and threw it out into the lawn. “It’s only going to come back, Kid,” my father insisted, “there’s no permanent solution to this, believe me.” Not a week later, he was proven right. That fat scaly son of a gun was back sitting right on top of my pop tarts again. I once again demanded that the creature be removed, and once again my father removed it, only for it to once again return. The third time he and my mom drove around town and dropped it off by their counselor’s office in the hopes that it would be confused enough not to return. The sixth time it happened, my dad and I went on a little road trip; we put the ophidian freeloader in a box and drove him three towns over and threw him in the woods while mom stayed with grandma for the weekend. By the fourteenth time, my parents had become fed up with my demands for a snake-free household and told me to just deal with it. Their thought-process was, it wasn’t bothering anyone (it wasn’t eating the food in the pantry, and any attempt by one of us to interact with it was met with complete indifference.) so we might as well leave it alone.

They soon returned to their fighting and left me to contemplate the true threat of the snakes. I wasn’t convinced of my parents’ plan of action. My general feelings about snakes were that they belonged in one place, and people belonged in a separate place, and the two places should not generally be intertwined. Alas, I was but a child and had little control over any household decisions, as would be made evident to me many times over the course of my life. Eventually, I like my parents, grew complacent with the wriggling creatures that occupied every corner of our home. The snakes soon took up the same brain space as ill-fitting clothing or a poorly-ventilated room: annoying but not urgent.

 Eventually more snakes arrived. These too were met with initial distrust, followed by general apathy. For their part as well, the snakes seemed to be content to go about their business while treating us with the same level of apathy as we did to them. In fact, the snakes didn’t seem to move much once they found a location they were content in. The first green one never moved from the pantry unless forced. There was a reticent blue one with dingy, unkempt scales that lived on top of the refrigerator, and an arrogant black one which always displayed its long gleaming tongue in the most haute way spent its days coiled around the coatrack. The worst one was the huge orange and white striped one which lived on my bed, it was much bigger than the others, at least twice the size of the green pantry lurker which until then had been the largest. This snake was easily nine feet long and apparently only felt comfortable in the folds of my bed. I didn’t mind sharing my bed so much, but he was very rude about the entire situation, at least as far as snakes can be rude. He just laid there coiled up in my sheets, any attempt to extricate my sheets from the snake was met with offended, but otherwise lazy hissing, and since the snake was so much larger than me it was hard to win through force. I would have slept on the couch, but that was where the purple-spotted one lived and it seemed hypocritical to uproot someone else’s sleeping quarters because I had been exiled from mine.

“Well, if you can’t manage to sleep in your own bed, I suppose we can set up an air mattress for you,” my father said sternly, irritated at the extra effort I was demanding of him, “but you’ll be responsible for putting it away each day, I don’t want an air mattress in the middle of the living room, what will company say?” It was a moot point, as we never had anyone over anyway, but acting like we did was a great excuse to not do things. “We can’t buy that new TV because it’ll take forever to set up and what if we have company? We can’t redo the guest room right now, where will company sleep? We can’t hire an exterminator for all these snakes, what if there’s company and we can’t have them over because we have one of those big dumb exterminator tents on our house?”

One day in eighth grade there was a snake in my backpack at school. It was white with green stripes down the length of it, making it look like a living blob of toothpaste. I was certainly embarrassed and did my best to hide it, but the little scoundrel eventually snuck out during history and curled up in one of my female classmate’s lap. I was reprimanded for disrupting the class and was asked to meet with the school counselor.

“How is everything at home?” she asked condescendingly. I replied noncommittally, declaring that things were the same as they ever were, which for the most part, they were. As I talked to the counselor, the same snake that had caused the problem wriggled on my lap and twisted around my body, hissing with what seemed like either delight or derision. The counselor and I both did our best to ignore it, but the thing was there in plain sight and clearly made her uncomfortable.

“Do your parents fight?” she asked, thinking this was some great insight. In fact, my parents hadn’t fought in some time; not like they used to anyway. At one point, there had been creative cursing and the throwing of various objects: plates, books, snakes. Now, if they had some kind of disagreement, the most you could expect was a quick passive aggressive barb and that was that. It was somewhat boring if I’m being honest.

“What about these snakes?” the counselor asked, “are they affecting your performance in school, do you think?” aside from the white and green backpack hitchhiker which got me in trouble, I didn’t think the snakes had any effect on my schooling. It would be easy to blame the snakes for any poor grades I got, and sometimes I did. What kid hasn’t used the old “my homework was eaten by snakes” excuse? I never really blamed the snakes though. I hated that there were snakes in my house, I hated that there was nowhere to go to avoid the snakes, but the snakes themselves were just there. When a fire burns down your house, you don’t blame the fire; you might wish that the fire hadn’t hit you, or even that it had gotten somebody else, and you curse God and your landlord and whoever else conspired with fate to engineer that fire, but you don’t blame the fire. So it was with me and the snakes. When the counselor asked me if the snakes hurt my schooling, all I could say was no.

On the rare occasion I would get a poor grade, it was mainly because I didn’t care. If I didn’t like a class, I wouldn’t attend. I had snakes all over my house, so school was actually one of the few places I could get some uninterrupted rest. It seemed silly to waste such valuable sleep time on stupid things like Gym or English class. Of course my teachers hated that and whenever I got caught they would report such behavior to my parents, but they didn’t care much. They gave me the obligatory tongue lashing, but then went about their business, as I went about mine.

“You hate school? Well guess what? That’s what school is for,” my dad would often say when I was caught skipping or being disrespectful. He didn’t say it loudly or with anger like one might expect, but with sympathy and resignation. He didn’t want to be there anymore than I did. As he would explain why I had to behave in school, the snakes in the living room watched with reptilian diligence. I wasn’t sure how much of what was going on they understood, but I doubt they cared much beyond the occasional diversion.

“School is the first thing that a person hates that they’re forced to get used to.” My dad would say. For me that would have been the snakes, but I never told him that. I felt sympathy for him. He didn’t want to admonish me, but he did what he had to do.

“I know you’re frustrated,” my mom would say, “If anyone knows frustration, it’s me. You just have to pick a point on the horizon and say ‘that’s when things will get better.’ That’s how I make it through the day.” I followed mom’s advice and chose my eighteenth birthday as my horizon: the day I could be free of this snake filled house and all the burdens it presented for me. It wasn’t until much later in life that I realized my birthday was probably mom’s horizon point as well. It was likely dad’s too, if he had one. Until that day, we were all pretty content to live our lives separately in the same house.

 When I was little I was always begging my parents to do something, anything, to get these snakes out of our lives; but by adolescence I had given up and realized that, like so many other projects of theirs that never got completed, the snakes would be no different and would languish in our home until it was nothing but wood and memories. I don’t blame them, not really. They spent most of my childhood slowly realizing that they did not love each other, and were in the early throes of a divorce that would not fully culminate until I was out of the house and they were free of the pesky variable my existence constituted. I was very aware of their problems, much more aware than they ever understood, and while I sympathized with them I found it difficult to consider their emotional well-being over the emotional distress that came with puberty and the thousands of snakes that had since come to reside in our home.

 We really did begin to see my eighteenth birthday as a happy conclusion. It was generally accepted, though rarely discussed, that that was when I would leave the house. I was planning to go to college, at least for a year or two until I could find an acceptable job and a snake-free apartment. I didn’t have any grand design for my life, and neither did my parents. We were all just eager for a chance to be free of each other and the obligations we all represented to one another. We also wanted to get away from the snakes.

 I did turn eighteen, as children are often wont to do, and my parents and I all went our separate ways. I went to a college out of state, which my parents were happy to pay for if it meant they could focus on their new lives without constant reminders of the old one. My father got remarried and had a beautiful daughter to whom I am Godfather. My mother never remarried, but she became an avid cook and eventually opened up her own restaurant which she runs with help from her long-term boyfriend Shawn. I see both of my parents regularly, but none of us are overly involved with the others’ lives, and we are all fairly content with that.

 We left that house with all the snakes in it, thinking that the house was the problem, but a few weeks after I had moved into my first apartment, I found a yellow and black one sleeping on my doormat. It was splayed warmly on my porch, enjoying the warm summer sun. It looked at me with black, glossy eyes, daring me to do something.

 I thought about running, just picking a direction and running away. I would only stop in any one place long enough to sleep and eat, and keep going. Surely the snakes couldn’t keep finding me if I never stopped?

Then I thought about killing it, taking a knife and chopping it up into little pieces so that all snakes everywhere would know that I was to be feared and that any home I lived in should be considered salted ground.

I even thought about killing myself, just going into the bathtub and casually opening my wrists. If this snake was any indication, I was never going to be free and there would always be more, so why live if the one thing I genuinely looked forward to was never going to happen?

In the end I went inside and made myself dinner as I heard the gentle sound of hissing gradually fill up the apartment.

I soon found out that my parents each also had new homes with new snakes. We moaned and whined about them, but we soon learned to live with these snakes the same way we lived with the old ones.

 I’m in my forties now, and I’m still doing all the things I’m supposed to do. I have a wife, three children of various genders, and more snakes than I could ever possibly count. The snakes live in every corner of my house now, all in different places than they did when I was a child, but they’re still there. Some I even recognize, like the petulant green loafer which once lived in my pantry and now resides on top of my microwave. It’s almost reassuring to have some of the same snakes my parents had. They’re a reminder that life just keeps changing and staying the same, like how a snake sheds its skin but is never not a snake.

My kids don’t notice the snakes, but they will at some point. I don’t know how they don’t notice them already. I wish the snakes weren’t here, but I honestly can’t think what life without them is like. I have lived with snakes since my childhood and now, my children will live with them too.